



The High Stakes of School Safety

We know that at the start of each school year, our students may feel some apprehension. They worry about getting along with their friends, meeting new classmates, and adjusting to new teachers, rules, and routines. But we hope that by the time several weeks have passed, their apprehension will be replaced by feelings of connectedness to teachers, classmates, and the broader school community.

Unfortunately, not all of our students feel safe and connected. Two recent reports show that students, parents, and teachers believe discipline and safety concerns continue to take a toll on the culture of our nation's schools and our students' perceived level of security.

The first, a study by Public Agenda, found that nearly seven in ten middle and high school teachers report that their schools have serious problems with students who disrupt classes. Teachers cite tardiness, cheating, insolence, and bullying as problems that overwhelm their efforts to promote a positive learning environment for all students.

The second, an analysis by the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, found that although measures of school violence such as carrying weapons and physical fighting have decreased since 1993, students today are more likely to miss school because they feel unsafe.

These student perceptions and teacher concerns are symptoms of a larger problem: difficulty establishing a trusting, healthy culture within many of our schools. Although attempts have been made in recent years to address school violence, such as increasing zero-tolerance policies and the number of police officers stationed on school grounds, these approaches typically focus on extreme cases of violence and do nothing to create a positive school culture.

Similarly, provisions in No Child Left Behind legislation requiring states to identify persistently dangerous schools and allow students who attend those schools to transfer do not help the majority of students in our schools feel safer. This measure may allow a few children to leave the most dangerous schools, but only a handful of schools have been identified. It would be a mistake to think that the problem lies in only this minority of schools or that allowing students to leave the school will solve the problem.

It is only by committing ourselves to developing safe, caring, respectful schools that we will really make a difference for our students by creating schools where they can grow into productive, healthy adults with the social, emotional, and academic skills needed to succeed in our society.

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